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MONTANA
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JUNE 1984

MEDICAL EXAMINER'S AND CORONER'S ALERT PROJECT

How would you like to receive a FREE newsletter keeping you informed of weird accidental deaths, not only in Montana, but in the entire United States?

To get your name on the mailing list - call toll FREE 1-800-638-8095.

CORONER'S CASES

A third of all deaths in a given county should be referred to the coroner. After referral, the coroner may or may not decide to investigate.

Several coroners have complained of not being notified when they should have been. When the percentage of deaths referred to the coroner is very low then a communication problem exists in the county. Educating hospitals, physicians, law enforcement and the general public is a problem for the coroner, as well as the county. The State Medical Examiner will help you in this education when needed.

Meanwhile, here are some percentages for the six largest counties over the past five years. The state average was 21.1. Remember, it should be 33% in an ideal situation.

	Yellowstone	Cascade	Missoula	Silver Bow	Lewis & Clark	Gallatin
1983	12.9	24.1	19.5	15.3	32.6	12.7
1982	15.2	22.4	20.4	15.6	30.0	12.1
1981	19.2	23.9	19.5	17.0	30.1	9.8
1980	18.5	22.5	21.9	21.7	29.7	13.8
1979	14.9	22.3	18.9	24.5	23.3	14.2

As you can see, Coroner Mickey Nelson in Helena has been most successful in keeping his constituents informed.

ON CALL SCHEDULE - MONTANA STATE MEDICAL EXAMINER

JUNE 1984

275 W. Front Street
Missoula, Montana 59802

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
					1	2 RON RIVERS
3 RON RIVERS	4	5	6	7	8	9 RON RIVERS
10 RON RIVERS	11	12	13	14	15	16 RON RIVERS
17 RON RIVERS	18	19	20	21	22	23 RON RIVERS
24 RON RIVERS	25	26	27	28	39	30 JOHN PFAFF

- National Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners - Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Telephone Numbers: State Office - 728-4970
WATS Line - 243-5796

Home Phone: Dr. Ron Rivers- 728-2033 (Home)
(week nights call unless otherwise indicated)

Dr. John Pfaff - Great Falls
Hospital - 727-3333
Home - 727-3905

Dr. Ken Mueller- Billings
Hospital - 657-7000
Home - 248-3024

JUNE 1984
FALLS
R.L. Rivers, M.D.

"It was around 6:30 this morning when Jim, our swamper, found him." The owner of the Blue Moon Saloon was talking to the homicide detective.

As the police took photos of the young man laying sprawled beneath the old wooden steps the detective asked, "When did you last see him?". The owner quickly responded, "Exactly at 2:00 a.m. That's when we close the bar and kick everybody out. He left by the back door." The owner pointed at the paint chipped door at the top of two flights of steps.

"How much had he been drinking?", asked the detective as he stooped to examine the pool of blood around the victim's head.

"He wasn't drunk, if that's what you mean. We don't allow our customers to get drunk. He only had a couple of beers."

"Of course." The detective's lips tightened. The bar was a notorious hangout for all the town drunks.

Later on the coroner and the detective were exchanging comments on the case. "That was a pretty good gash on the back of his head. It was at least four inches long." The coroner grimaced as he pointed out the location on his own head.

"Even though his pockets were turned inside out I'm not too sure we are dealing with a homicide."

"How is that?"

"Well, the fact that there isn't any kind of a weapon around doesn't rule it out but - "

"Yes?"

"That bottom step had some blood and hair on it. He might of tumbled down those old stairs in the dark and gashed his head on the bottom step. Of course, since he was laying so close to that step he could have hit it after he was whomped with a tire iron or somethin'."

"But what about the pockets?"

"Shoot, in this neighborhood, it's nothin' to roll some old drunk. They may have not known that this was a dead drunk."

"Well, how the heck are we going to know if he fell on his head or was struck on the head?"

"I know who knows. Ever hear of a contrecoup lesion?"

JUNE 1984
FALLS
R.L. Rivers, M.D.

QUESTIONS:

1) Who knows?

2) How do they know?

3) Who knows what contrecoup means?

4) If he fell, what precautions should be taken?

5) Next to motor vehicle accidents, what is the major accidental fatality?

ANSWERS

1. The murderer knows - if he was murdered - and the medical examiner knows - if he was autopsied.

2. A gash or laceration on the head from a fall commonly has an abrasion of the scalp right next to it. The skin scrapes the surface before splitting open. A blow to the head with a blunt object usually just leaves a laceration.

   Sometimes the wound will contain trace evidence such as wood, paint, rust, etc. that may identify the blunt instrument.

   The hands and lower arms should be carefully examined for defense wounds or injuries that may indicate he was trying to protect himself from an assault.

3. A contrecoup lesion of the brain indicates a fall. At the post-mortem examination of the brain, a large area of bleeding will be found completely opposite from the scalp injury! Amazingly there may not be any bleeding in the brain directly beneath the head wound. Hit a head with a crowbar however and you can count on a large amount of blood in the brain directly beneath the split skull. This is called a coup lesion.

4. If he fell, the relatives are going to sue the Blue Moon Saloon. Good riddance, you might say, unless you or your relatives own the place. But we are concerned with justice, so order toxicology to find out how drunk he really was and to rule out any narcotics. Test for medicines that might cause dizziness, or medicines for epilepsy, diabetes or heart disease.

   Save any glasses, if any, to see how good his vision was. Check his eyes for a glass one, or cataracts, or obvious blindness. The family may not mention these impairments during the lawsuit.

   The brain will also be examined for a tumor or disease that may make him susceptible to falling.

ANSWERS CONTINUED:

If the blood alcohol is negative, then he survived long enough to metabolize the beer he drank. If there is a subdural hematoma (blood clot) in the brain then it can be analyzed for alcohol. The alcohol will be trapped in the clot that formed at the time his head was hit.

If you don't investigate all these things you can bet the defense attorney will bring it up in court.

5. Falls -

then drowning, fire, poison, asphyxia, and firearms, in that order. The greatest number of deaths by falling is in the elderly age group.